FORGET NOT

Madhusudana Sarasvati : A Forgotten Glory of Bengal

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Madhusudana Sarasvati is indeed, one of the forgotten glories of Bengal—nay of India. If we take *Bhāshyotkarshadipikā* as the best explanation of Shankara's commentary on *Gitā*, then Madhusudana's *Gudārthadipikā*, an interpretation of the *Gitā*, will surely stand as the second best. That itself speaks volumes. *vidyā dādāti vinayam*—so runs the Sanskrit adage and how humble and what humility does he show towards great Shankara! Comparing his own exegesis of the *Gitā* with that of Shankara, he humbly says that the goldsmiths place gold in one plate of the scales and the red *gunja* beads on the other; somehow their weight also becomes the same, but can there be any comparison between gold and *gunja*?

Really, next to Acharya Shankara, Madhusudana Sarasvati brought back and re-established the supremacy of Advaita Vedanta, when this non-dual thesis was being challenged by such formidable scholars like Bhāskarāchārya, Ramānujāchārya, Gangesha and Madhvāchārya. His *magnum opus*, *Advaitasiddhi*, answered all the points raised by these scholars and almost put an end to these notes of challenge. It is a tribute to his genius, that after all this, he never bade goodbye to the school of *Bhakti* but made a grand synthesis of these apparently opposing theses in his great *Bhaktirasāyana*.

As in all questions of antiquity, neither the year of his birth nor his death has been ascertained. However, without going into the critical details, we may assert on the authority of Gopi Nath Kaviraja that Madhusudana flourished in the 16th century. (According to Swami Jagadishwarananda, however, he belonged to 15th century because he was a contemporay of Sri Chaitanya Deva.) His birthplace is said to be the village named Kotalipara in Faridpur (now in Bangladesh) and after his brother's death, he lost all material attraction for the world and came over to Navadwip to meet the great savant Sri Chaitanya and learn at his feet. However, even after several serious attempts he could not meet Chaitanya. So he began to study *navya-nyāya* and grew into such a formidable scholar that, it is said, even the greatest in this school like Tarkavāgisha and Gadādhara began to tremble at the utterance of his name. This is apparent from this couplet: *Navadwipe samāyāte Madhusudanavākpatau / Chakampe Tarkavāgisham kātarodbhud Gadādharah.* That is, 'After the arrival of learned Madhusudana, Tarkavāgisha began to tremble and Gadādhara became restless.'

In the beginning, Madhusudana wanted to challenge the non-dual thesis of Shankara from the standpoint of *navya-nyāya*. But luck wished otherwise. Madhusudana came to Varanasi from Navadwip and gradually his erudition made him famous among Sanskrit scholiasts of the time; he began to be looked upon as the top scholar among scholars. But he never ran after fame and adopted monkhood. Peculiarly his interest now veered round Advaita philosophy instead of Nyāya. And Madhusudana became the staunchest upholder and spokesman for this school. He brought to bear upon his vast

learning of all branches of Indian logic and metaphysics to vindicate the impregnable non-dual thesis of Shankara.

The fame of his learning reached far and wide and became almost proverbial. The following couplet that was current then bears testimony to his profundity: *Madhusudana sarasvatyāh pāram vetti sarasvati Sarasvatyāh pāram vetti madhusudanasarasvati* II That is, 'Madhusudana Sarasvati alone knows the expanse of Goddess Sarasvati's learning and that Goddess Sarasvati alone knows the depth of Madhusudana's knowledge'. Indeed he was held in the highest esteem by one and all.

In his *Catalogus Catalogorum*, Aufrecht, the German scholar, has listed twenty-two books under Madhusudana's name, but many of them have been proved to be spurious. Apart from his *magnum opus Advaitasiddhi* of the non-dual school, and his grand synthesis of *bhakti* and *jnāna* in *Bhaktirasāyana*, he is unquestionably the author of *Vedānta-kalpa-latikā*, *Advaita-ratna-samgraha*, *Gudārthadipikā* (his exegesis on the *Gitā*), *Samkshepa-shāriraka*, *Bhāgavata-purāna*, (especially his interpretation of the first shloka) and again an excellent exegesis on Puspadanta's *Mahimna-stotra*. Indeed these books have made him immortal.

Apart from his profound erudition Madhusudana was a many-splendoured personality. There are so many legends current even now in his name. And in modern historiography these legends are not looked down upon as unworthy materials of history as they were done in the past. Incidentally, Herodotus, the father of Greek history, incorporated many myths and legends in his great history of the Peloponnesian War fought between Athens and Sparta. (431-404 BC).

Be that as it may, one such legend marks Madhusudana out as a friend of Todarmal with whose help he met Emperor Akbar and pleaded the cause of the Hindus and especially of the monks and actually won some favour for both. It is also said that he was the first monk to resist the passive suffering of the monks with their reliance on fate and brought out a band of brave young sannyasins to resist the Muslim onslaught.

But perhaps the most remarkable was his advocacy for the cause of vernacular language and literature instead of Sanskrit, though he was by far the foremost scholar in Sanskrit at that time. When great Tulasidāsa composed his *Rāmacharitamānasa* in Avadhi Hindi it was thought to be a sacrilege as if he had defiled the language of the gods which Sanskrit is. The traditional Sanskrit scholars took up arms against him and wanted the support of the leading Sanskrit scholar—Madhusudana Sarasvati.

But to the great surprise and exasperation of the orthodox scholars, the verdict of Madhusudana went in favour of Tulasidāsa as he had done much to spread *dharma* in a popular language and inspired the populace. Indeed, Tulasidāsa did as was done by Buddha long before through Pāli. Madhusudana did not only stop with his support but also composed a couplet in eulogy of the achievement of Tulasidāsa. He wrote:

Ānandakānane yasmin jangalastulasitaruh / Kavitāmanjari bhāti rāmabhramarabhushitā II

It means, 'in this Kāshi (Vārānasi), the abode of joy, Tulasidāsa is the moving tree whose petals are adorned with flowers where Rāma, as the bee, is always humming'. This was no eulogy but a deep statement in appreciation of a great contemporaneous devotee-poet. It shows a dynamic, free and catholic spirit of this great savant who was as bold in foresight and free-thinking and as great in learning too. This speaks of a sense of tolerance and synthesis between the old and the new spirit. This was the hall-mark of his stupendous learning. He furrowed all branches of Sanskrit learning

and all schools of Indian metaphysics without losing respect for any though he always stuck to his advaitic standpoint.

His *Bhaktirasāyana* appears also as a *magnum opus* of catholic synthesis. Madhusudana here succeeds in the tight-rope-walking between monism and dualism. On the basis of the *Bhāgavata*, how nicely he unites Brahman and *Bhāgavat* and explains it as a union of knowledge and bliss. *Bhāgavata* itself is identical with *bhakti* which ultimately culminates in the highest *rasa*. Thus without violating monism, the thesis of *bhakti* is fully vindicated. This is no mere logic-chopping but a spontaneous outflow of his spirit of synthesis.

It is a matter of great pity that Bengal herself, not to speak of India, has forgotten this worthy and noble son. All his Sanskrit books have been published in *devnāgari* script from Varanasi. His famous exegesis of the *Gitā* has only recently been published in Bengali script and translation by the renowned scholar Bhutanath Saptatirtha, that too for the munificence of Dr Nalini Kanta Brahma of the Presidency College. And still more important, his *Bhaktirasāyana* has been edited and translated in Bengali by the noted scholar Durgacharan Samkhya-Vedantatirtha, here too by the munificence of Mr Justice Digambar Chatterjee of the Calcutta High Court. Such benevolence is becoming rare and what will be the future of Sanskrit learning in Bengal? ■

The Shattering of Illusion

Who is thy wife? Who is thy son?
The ways of this world are strange
indeed.
Whose art thou? Whence art thou come?
Vast is thy ignorance, my beloved.
Therefore ponder these things and
worship the Lord.

Behold the folly of Man:
In childhood busy with his toys,
In youth bewitched by love,
In age bowed down with cares—
And always unmindful of the Lord!
The hours fly, the seasons roll, life ebbs,
But the breeze of hope blows
continually in his heart.

Birth brings death, death brings rebirth:
This evil needs no proof.
Where then, O Man is thy happiness?
This life trembles in the balance
Like water on a lotus-leaf—
And yet the sage can show us, in an
instant,
How to bridge this sea of change.

When the body is wrinkled, when
the hair turns grey,
When the gums are toothless, and the
old man's staff
Shakes like a reed beneath his weight,
The cup of his desire is still full.

Thy son may bring thee suffering,
Thy wealth is no assurance of heaven:
Therefore be not vain of thy wealth,
Or of thy family, or of thy youth—
All are fleeting, all must change.
Know this and be free.
Enter the joy of the Lord.

Seek neither peace nor strife
With kith or kin, with friend or foe.
O beloved, if thou wouldst attain
freedom,
Be equal unto all.

—From Achārya Shankara's 'Moha Mudgaram'